

THE BELLE OF FLORENCE.

Towards the middle of the seventeenth century Florence still groaned under the terrible guardianship of the Medici, and crimes of the deepest dye stain the annals of those years. Nothing prospered under the misrule, save vice and knavery.

At that time the belle of Florence was Caterina Torella, a young and singularly interesting girl, who had been deprived of her parents by an epidemic the year before. Lovely as an angel in person, Caterina was gifted with all the qualities of a refined, sensitive, and generous mind. Her education had been of the first order, and her talents almost amount to genius.

Fairer than most of the Florentine women, her arms and neck were dazzling in their purity and smoothness. Her hair, scarcely what might be called black, but rather the deepest shade of brown, fell over her superb shoulders in a luxuriance seldom equalled, and when unbound it almost covered her perfect figure.

Unprotected as she was, Caterina was induced to contract a marriage which was every way unfitting, and which eventually brought sorrow and anguish to many hearts that loved the young and beautiful orphan.

At the church of Saint Ambrogio, she attracted the attention of Giustino Canacci, a Florentine gentleman, who—although he had a son by a former marriage whose age would have been far more suitable to hers—succeeded in engaging the interest and sympathy of Caterina.

She married him, and perhaps felt a sense of protection in his love; but her affections were never his. She became sad, dull, and melancholy, and they who had known the lively and fascinating girl could scarcely recognize the grave, thoughtful woman who presided over Canacci's house, and was called *mother* by the grown-up son, Bartolommeo.

But although the youth called her by that sacred name, he had over felt dislike towards her—either on her own account, or from unwillingness to see his dead mother's place occupied; and he neglected no opportunity of making her feel that she was an unwelcome inmate of the house, as far as he was concerned.

Nothing, however, could weaken the passion which Canacci felt for his young and beautiful wife. He lavished money and jewels in profusion, and allowed her the utmost latitude, both in expense and liberty of action. She went into society constantly, or received guests of distinction for wealth and talents at her own house.

Among the guests was Jacopo Salviati, the Duke of San Giuliano, and on his first introduction to her she resumed a portion of the light-hearted manner which was so essentially her own. They talked together, and mutual sympathy was at once established. The duke had married unhappily. His wife was Veronica Cibo, of the Princes of Massa, a haughty, exacting woman, who was jealous of her young and handsome husband, and who had hitherto been quite unable to attach himself to her.

Private interviews soon succeeded this introduction. It was a fearful ordeal for two young, beautiful, and passionate creatures, of whom one was wedded to age, and the other to ugliness and pride, and they did not pass through unscathed.

Long and secretly were they beloved by each other, unsuspected by the duchess or the husband of Caterina. At length one evening the former received a note of so startling a nature that she summoned the writer to an immediate conference. A low-browed, sallow man obeyed her summons.

"Are you prepared to furnish proofs to sustain the assertions you make in this note?" she asked, holding out the paper which she had crumpled in her wrath, and which he recognized as his own.

"I am, madame."

"By what token?"

"By my own name, which is also dishonoured. I am the son of Caterina Canacci's husband. My father as yet regards his wife as innocent. He is an old man. I would not bring the task of punishment upon his hands, but I willingly take part with yourself."

"Good! my revenge will be sure, depend on it. I will not spare."

It was the 31st of December, 1638. The day had been chilly, but the Italian sunset had been glorious, and had faded away into the soft twilight, which had again given place to darkness. Under cover of this darkness, Caterina Canacci had left her house unsuspected, and taken her way towards a house at the end of the Via de Pilastri, close to the church of St. Ambrogio, where she first met her husband, and which she never passed without a feeling of profound regret that she had ever entered it.

She had, perhaps, appointed to meet the Duke, but he had not appeared. Several friends who were in his confidence were present, and Caterina had prepared a little entertainment to pass away the time—glad to escape from the insupportable dullness of home and the intolerable stupidity of Bartolommeo, who persisted in making a part of the evening circle, although he could well see that his presence was disagreeable and annoying to Caterina.

But he knew what he was about. Many an evening he had tracked her, disguised as she was, to the Via de Pilastri; and this evening of all others he intended to enter and enjoy the confusion which he knew she must feel most keenly at sight of him.

He had just received a note from the duchess, in which she told him that he was to meet three persons at a certain place, conduct them to the house in question, and leave them to perform her orders. What these orders were, in Justice to Bartolommeo we must record that he was far from imagining—but that it would be by *exposure* he doubted not.

He went to the place appointed, and found, as the duchess had forewarned him, three men, apparently of rank and fashion. In those days, however, men of that stamp frequently joined the various associations of lawless ruffians who preyed upon society and reaped gold from their crimes.

He conducted them, without a word, towards the church of San Ambrogio. Standing for a moment under its sacred portal, aided by the feeble light that burned before the image of the patron saint of the church, he selected a key from many others. This he had caused to be made from one stolen from the cabinet of his young stepmother, and which he had already used to open the house in the Via de Pilastri.

The men followed him in, and proceeded to an inner apartment, of which the door stood ajar. By this door they took up their station, watching and listening. Sounds of laughter, mingled with song, greeted their ears. Two or three women and as many men sat around a table on which were wines and refreshments. Gaiety ruled the hour. Caterina alone did not join it. There was a shadow over her beautiful face, and her large lustrous eyes seemed to shine only through unshed tears. Already, perhaps, she sickened over the thought that she might be betrayed to her husband. Or it may be that penitence had already begun, and the sad upward look of those eyes might be asking pity and forgiveness for her errors.

Canacci had liked to see his young wife richly dressed, and had loaded her with jewels and trinkets of the most costly nature. But this evening she was indebted to none of these. She wore a plain grey dress without a single ornament. The long tresses were gathered in a style of severest simplicity at the back of her head, and the arms and neck were scrupulously covered. Still she was never more perfectly lovely, now that her beauty was not dependent on flower, or gem, or costly fabric. The pure marble of her face was not lighted up by the faintest shade of crimson, but her lips had not yielded their rich colour to the sadness that was evidently growing upon her. But the paleness, the sadness,—were they not prophetic?

How felt the hard, cold, cruel Veronica on this eventful evening? "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." How eagerly she waited for her coadjutor, Bartolommeo Canacci, himself as cold, as hard, and cruel as she; She hears a step, and in a moment, breathless and trembling with his first great crime, he appears before her with